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# THE COLOUR-SENSE IN LITERATURE

BY  
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## NOTE

THE paper here reprinted was first published in *The Contemporary Review* for May, 1896. It may have been the earliest attempt to put on an impersonal and objective foundation the study of the reactions experienced by poets to the colour of the world in which they lived. But the way for such a study had been prepared. Darwin in 1871 in his *Descent of Man* had suggested how colour may have had an influence of considerable importance in the evolution of species. Various writers, notably Grant Allen in 1877 in his suggestive book, *Physiological Aesthetics*, had pursued the matter further by indicating the presence of the physiological element in our tastes in literature and in art. The way had been made smooth for entering the psychological field and seeking to show how widely poets vary in their reactions to the colour world.

On such a subject we are tempted to be content with impressions. But mere impressions, as all scientific workers know, are absolutely unreliable. We need more precise tests. Mr. Arthur Symonds remarked, when my paper was published, that, notwithstanding his familiarity with Coleridge, he would have formed a totally different impression of that poet's use of colour, and for Marlowe would have expected more prominence of scarlet. Rossetti, when in 1865 he tried to think out the order in which he himself loved colour, found it to be: (1) green, (2) gold, (3) gray, (4) blue, (5) brown, and (6) scarlet.

He was probably thinking of his work as a painter, but the colour-order he sets down is quite unlike his more instinctive and unconscious preferences as revealed in his poetry. The significance of such a study as the present is thus brought out.

If I were writing this paper now I would naturally wish to include some more recent writers, such as Proust and Joyce and T. S. Eliot. It is easy, however, for any reader to make such examination for himself. There have, indeed, I believe, been some studies on similar lines, especially in the United States, since this paper was published. I am content to leave as it was written my own pioneering effort in an interesting field.

H. E.

*August 30th, 1931.*



## THE COLOUR-SENSE IN LITERATURE

SOME years ago a discussion arose as to the evolution of the human colour-sense. It was alleged by certain writers that the more refrangible rays of the spectrum, especially green and blue, have only become clearly visible to man during the last thousand years, and Mr. Gladstone came to the front with the assertion that Homer, and the early Greeks generally, never clearly saw these colours. That discussion has been ended. There is now no doubt ~~whatever~~ that all races of men, concerning which any evidence can be obtained, have been acquainted with the same regions of the spectrum which we know. The colour-vision of savages, whenever carefully tested, is found to be admirable, as is also that of the lower animals, and there is no reason to suppose that so useful an aptitude ever fell into abeyance. It remains true, however, that while man's colour-vision has in all probability always been excellent, his colour-vocabulary has sometimes been extremely defective, even among ourselves to-day remaining very vague;\* and it is also probable that at different periods and among different races, as well as among individuals, very varying colour preferences have arisen. That is to say that the question belongs, not

\* In *Nature*, last year, a prolonged discussion was carried on as to the best means of remedying the gross vagueness and inaccuracy of our colour nomenclature.

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to the region of physiology, but to that of philology and that of æsthetics. It is in this last field that I wish to pursue the investigation.

It seems fairly obvious that we may best ascertain and trace any evolution in colour preferences by the comparative study of imaginative writers who instinctively record the impressions they receive from the external world. A scientific æsthetic, on a psychological basis, has yet scarcely come into existence, and it is not easy to place one's hands on any careful studies in this direction. Some fifteen years ago Mr. T. A. Archer, in a defunct magazine called *To-Day*, published an admirable example of such investigation by determining the precise parts played by the various senses in the work of Shelley and Keats. More recently, in 1888, M. G. Pouchet published in the *Revue Scientifique* a short study of the colour-sense in literature which suggested my own more elaborate investigation. M. Pouchet approached the matter as a physiologist's holiday-task, and by taking a few pages from five authors, nearly all French, and noting the number and nature of the colour-words they used, he reached the conclusion that the predominant colour in literature is always red; but his data were too small and his methods too careless to carry full conviction. One more recent study may be mentioned as coming within the same group; in the *España Moderna* for March, 1894, Dr. Thebussen published a paper on "Lo Verde," in which he showed, by a detailed though not numerical study, that Cervantes had a special predilection for green, making the eyes of Dulcinea *verdes esmeraldas*, going out of his way to clothe his favourite personages in green, and otherwise dwelling on this colour in a manner which was not

common among his contemporaries ; Dr. Thebussen further argued that there is a certain general repulsion to green. These are all the investigations into this field that I am acquainted with, and they are all on a very small scale.

I have selected a series of imaginative writers, usually poets, dating from the dawn of literature to our own day ; and in considerable fragments of their works, sometimes their complete works, I have noted the main colour-words that occur, and have also noted how these words were used. I now present the chief numerical results, together with certain observations suggested by those results.

In the course of the investigation I encountered numerous fallacies and difficulties. And I do not pretend that I have circumvented them all, for it soon became abundantly evident that while certain interesting results could be reached along the lines I had marked out, this was eminently a case for remembering Aristotle's warning against a misapplied precision of method. I was careful to avoid the danger of taking too small a basis for calculation ; I was also careful to eliminate any bias of my own, and, as will be seen, I have not been able to show that any one colour dominates imaginative literature from first to last. In some cases it is not easy to ascertain whether any colour at all is intended ; this is frequently the case with the epithet " golden," a double-barrelled epithet such as poets love, and here each case had to be judged on its merits. A still greater difficulty was the limitation of colour-words : must every word with a suggestion of colour be included ? In some cases, as with Shelley's constant references to flame, the answer would certainly affect the result. I decided to neglect

all rarely used metaphorical colours (such as "sapphire," "emerald," "sable," "argent"), the chief apparent exception being "golden," when used as a conventional equivalent of "yellow." Thus the colour-words to which my investigation applies are white, gray, red (with ruddy), scarlet, crimson, pink, vermilion (with vermeil), rosy (with roseate), yellow, golden (with gilded), green, blue, azure, violet, purple, and black. One might expect to see orange in this list, as a spectrum colour, but there is the same dislike of this colour among poets which experimental psychologists have found among ordinary individuals; it scarcely occurs more than once to a thousand colour-words, and has been disregarded as a negligible quantity.

In Table I. my results are expressed in their crudest form. In Table II., I have simplified the main results by summing together the reds,\* yellows, and blues, omitting entirely gray, violet, purple, and brown, and for purposes of comparison bringing them all to percentages; in this table we obtain in the simplest form six colours—for white and black are colours from the present point of view—with which psychological investigation is mainly concerned. On the right of Table II. will be found enumerated the most predominant colours in each writer; on the left what I term his colours of predilection—that is to say, the colours he uses with special frequency as compared with other writers. Neither table shows the relative density of colour, though there would be some interest in ascertaining this; in general, it may be said that recent writers use more colour than earlier

\* Including rosy and crimson; both these colours have some claim to be regarded as purples, but the poets have chiefly seen red in them.

TABLE I.

	White	Gray	Red.	Scarlet.	Crimson.	Pink	Vermilion.	Rosy.	Yellow.	Golden.	Blue	Azure.	Green	Violet	Purple.	Brown.	Black
Mountain Chant	21		2						10		15				2		28
Wooing of Emer	10	2	14						1		2					2	4
Volsunga Saga	2	2	10														
Isaiah, Job, Song of Songs	5		4	2	2					1							
Homer	9	2	1				1	1							2	1	4
Catullus	21	3	5					4	7	5	2				1		21
Chaucer	27	2	22						4	4					5		4
Marlowe	9		2	2	2		2	1	1	9	1	1	11		1	1	10
Shakespeare	18	2	19	1	2		1	2	3	11	3	2	3		5		13
Thomson	2	2			1			3				1	6		4	6	16
Blake	15	2	7		3			2		15	5	1	14		3	2	8
Coleridge	41	12	20	2	3	1		7	8	7	27	1	49	1	13	4	31
Shelley	37	23	17		7		1		10	32	33	13	46		17	3	26
Keats	11	4	6	1	2		4	6		17	5	5	23		4		1
Wordsworth	14	16	4			1		5	8	10	7	4	35		5	1	12
Poe	2	2	5						4	4		1		3	3		9
Baudelaire	17	2	10	1			6	13	6	8	13	11	15	2	3	7	52
Tennyson	36	10	21	2	8			14	7	18	16		24		12	2	18
Rossetti	60	19	33		2			9	1	45	14		26		2	9	20
Swinburne	46	7	45	1				1	2	27	11		18		9	4	6
Whitman	31	11	24	4	1	2		1	11	1	10		17	1	2	11	19
Pater	23	8	6						4	6			6	1	3	2	4
Verlaine	24	11	12				4	13	5	13	15	2	11		2	4	21
Olive Schreiner	34	3	20			1		1	7	4	17		3		1	3	2
D'Annunzio	11	1	13	3			14	3	1	7	3	7	5	5	3	1	4

writers, and that a poet's early work shows more colour than his later work, but there are numerous exceptions.

The "Mountain Chant of the Navajo Indians"—written down by Dr. Washington Matthews in the *Fourth Annual Report of the American Bureau of Ethnology*—is not believed to be very ancient. But it is both highly poetic and very primitive. Colour is used copiously, usually as the repetition of a formula; it is evident that colour among the Navajos is highly symbolical; black, which occurs most frequently, stands for man, blue for woman.

"The Wooing of Emer"—translated by Professor Kuno Meyer in the first volume of the *Archæological Review*—is an Irish tale, written down in the eleventh century, but belonging to the sixth century. It is a peculiarly fresh and vivid picture of early Keltic life. We may note here for the first time the predominance of red and white. Red hair seems to have impressed this poet; but, apart from this, the same colour epithet is seldom applied twice to the same object; colour here is not used as a formula, it has been clearly seen; and it is largely this characteristic which gives life and charm to the tale.

In the Icelandic "Volsunga Saga," as translated by Magnusson and William Morris, there is singularly little colour, though I have read the greater part of it from this point of view. Red predominates exclusively, whether as red blood, red gold, or more variously.

The Homeric figures are founded on an examination of the first three books of the *Iliad* in the translation by Dr. Leaf, who is thus responsible for the colours assigned. The preponderance of black is entirely due to the frequent reference to "black ships"; "white

TABLE II.

COLOURS OF PREDILECTION.	White	Yellow.	Red.	Green.	Blue*	Black	PREDOMINANT COLOURS.
Blue, black .	28	13	3	.	19	37	Black, white.
Red .	34	3	48		14	14	Red, white.
Red .	14		71			.	Red.
Green, red .							
	18	4	29	33	..	15	Green red
Black, yellow	21	21	7	2		49	Black, white-yellow
White, yellow	40	21	17	9	4	8	White, yellow.
White, red	34	10	28	14	1	13	White, red.
Yellow, purple, black.	19	21	19	6	6	28	Black, yellow.
Red	22	17	30	7	4	20	Red, white
Brown, black, green	9	..	18	27	9	36	Black, green.
Black	17	17	13	16	7	29	Black, white-yellow.
Blue, green	21	7	17	25	14	16	Green, white
Blue, purple, gray	17	19	11	21	21	11	Green-blue.
Yellow, green	14	23	24	29	8	1	Green, red
Green, gray	14	18	10	35	11	12	Green, yellow.
Yellow, violet, purple	8	32	20	12	4	24	Yellow, black.
Black, blue	11	9	19	10	16	34	Black, red
Purple .	22	15	27	15	10	11	Red, white.
Yellow, white, gray	30	22	22	9	7	10	White, yellow.
Red, white	28	18	28	16	6	4	Red, white.
Brown, red, pink	25	10	26	14	8	16	Red, white.
White, yellow, gray	43	19	11	11	9	7	White, yellow.
Gray .	20	15	24	9	14	18	Red, white.
Blue, white .	38	12	25	3	19	2	White, red
Red, blue, violet	15	11	46	7	14	6	Red, white.

arms ” and “ golden hair ” are also common ; on the whole, the colour epithets are much more conventional than in the Irish heroic-tale.

Homer’s colour terminology, and that of the Greeks generally, is very vague ; but in these respects they by no means stand alone ; thus Hindostani, spoken by a highly intelligent people possessing a fully developed colour-sense, presents precisely similar peculiarities. “ Black ” means “ dark ” both in Homeric Greece and modern India ; in both countries also the same word might be applied to gray things and green things ; just as in Brittany also the word *glas* can be applied alike to a pale blue cloth, a green field, and a dapple-gray horse. I have made some examination of the Greek Anthology, as representing a later period of Greek æsthetic feeling, and find a similar absence of blue and green, and slightly greater prevalence of red, while black has receded into the background to give place to yellow and white.

This is the state of things we find in Catullus on examining the majority of his *Carmina*, and we may conclude that it represents the typical æsthetic colour-vision of classic times. It happens that the colours that predominate in Catullus are those with the most numerous synonyms—white with *candidus*, *albus*, *niveus* ; yellow with *aureus*, *luteus*, *flavus*, *crocinus*—but, as will be seen later, this is not necessarily the chief factor in the matter. It is noteworthy that the modern synonyms for white and yellow are by no means so numerous. It is evident that the men of classical antiquity had a special joy in these colours which has not always been shared by the dwellers in Christendom. To the northern men, who largely moulded our conceptions, white was not always the



symbol of lucky and happy things ; living among white mists and faces that grow pale with distress, they were not apt to find white the colour of joy and beauty. And both our literature and actual experiment show that, while we often delight in things we vaguely call "golden," deep yellow and orange are relatively unpleasant to us except during childhood.

"Job," the "Song of Songs," and "Isaiah," the first as translated by Renan, the others in the Revised English Version, are all considered to belong to the time of Hezekiah, the finest age of Hebrew literature. The interesting point to note here is the prominence of green, which, for the first time in the series, ranks beside red. It predominates both in "Job" and the "Song of Songs." I think we may put this down to the fact that these works belong to a considerably developed state of literary and philosophic culture, and partly also perhaps to the nature of the country in which the writers lived ; the marked contrast between the desert barrenness of Judæa and the green luxuriance of Galilee was well adapted to stimulate the æsthetic colour sense.

Chaucer, in portions of the *Legend of Good Women* and the *Canterbury Tales*, uses simple red and white in considerable profusion, and very frequently in conjunction, whether of a fair face, a flower like the daisy, or wines. In the matter of hair he seems to have a predilection for yellow or "gilt."

Of Marlowe, I include the first two sestiads of *Hero and Leander*, the second part of *Tamburlaine*, and *Edward II.* In *Hero and Leander* there is much bold, vivid, rather careless colour ; in *Tamburlaine* there is a marked decrease, and black is very prominent ; in *Edward II.* there is all but complete absence of colour

epithets. This rapid movement towards a singularly austere and dignified style is significant of this rare poet. Many of the colour adjectives in his early work—"blushing coral," "silver tincture of cheek," "ivory throat," &c.—do not come within my lists. His few green epithets do not usually refer to vegetation, to which he was insensitive, though he was clearly not insensitive to more unusual green colour effects.

I have selected Shakespeare's "Sonnets" as his most personal utterance, and "Venus and Adonis" as a characteristic youthful poem, avoiding the plays, in which the colouring might be held to be largely of the scene-painting order. I believe this selection is fairly comparable with Marlowe's work. The "Sonnets" give very different results from the longer poem; they are much severer in colour, black and yellow predominating, while in "Venus and Adonis" there is a profusion of red and white, with very little black or yellow. It is easy to gain a view of Shakespeare's colour generally by turning to a good concordance such as Schmidt's *Shakespeare Lexicon*. He appears, speaking roughly, to use red epithets about eighty times to fifty times that he uses green, if we exclude the numerous cases in which he uses green without any reference to colour. Shakespeare's use of colour is very extravagant, symbolical, often contradictory. He plays with colour, lays it on to an impossible thickness, uses it in utterly unreal senses to describe spiritual facts. Colours seems to become colourless algebraic formulæ in his hands. It may safely be said that no great poet ever used the colours of the world so disdainfully, making them the play-things of a mighty imagination, only valuing them for

the emphasis they may give to the shapes of his own inner vision. In his use of colour Shakespeare bears witness to his belief in Prospero's philosophy, and counts the external world as but a gay, insubstantial fabric, a mere Japanese house set up over a volcano, and though he seems well pleased to live there, he is sometimes tempted to thrust his fist through the walls.

With Thomson's *Castle of Indolence* we are in the midst of the eighteenth century, with its cheerful sobriety of expression, far indeed from Shakespeare's bold and careless colour. Black here prevails enormously over white, and yellow is totally absent. The prominence of brown is remarkable, and reminds us that Thomson belonged to the age which asked of its painters: Where is your brown tree? A significant fact also is the increasing prevalence of green.

Blake's case is interesting as that of a poet who was also an artist in design. His verbal colour (as represented in the little volume of selections in the "Canterbury Poets") is very personal and very characteristic of his work in design. Black and white, together with yellow (invariably in its vaguest form as "golden"), predominate. In his love of black he belongs to his age, but he evidently had a distinct predilection for it (as in his admiration for black eyes), although he is not absolutely insensitive to the value of strong colour; for instance, he speaks of the "crimson joy of the rose." Except, however, in the *Songs of Innocence*, colour epithets are but sparsely sprinkled through his work.

Coleridge (if we consider nearly the whole of his poetic work) at once continued the eighteenth-century movement in favour of green and united it with Blake's revival of yellow, bringing in at the same time,

as his own contribution, a return to white and corresponding repugnance to black, which has ever since characterised English literature. Although with his profoundly personal imaginative vision, Coleridge instinctively helped to change the prevalent colour-formula of his time, it must be admitted that his use of colour is rather commonplace. He clearly had no æsthetic joy in colour.

This cannot be said of Shelley (basing the observations on the Canterbury Series volume of selections), for his colour is profuse in the highest degree and he evidently enjoyed it keenly. Unlike most poets—and in this resembling his contemporary, Turner, in painting—he began with no special love of colour, but developed it with his general development. The chief character of Shelley's colour is that it is always mingled with light and movement; for him, as for Heraclitus, the world was a perpetual flux. His is "a green and glowing light, like that which drops from folded lilies in which glow-worms dwell." It is translucent colour, proceeding from some "inmost purple spirit of light," and he seems to be always looking through a rainbow-hued cascade. A curious feature in his use of colour is the evidently unconscious repetition of the same word within a few lines; the colour seems to flash before him and disappear. His colours are fluid, opaline, iridescent; in this again, as in the *Witch of Atlas*, strongly resembling Turner's later use of colour; they make "a tapestry of fleece-like mist," or "woven exhalation underlaid with lambent lightning fire." No poet has ever used fire so extensively; "men scarcely know how beautiful fire is," he says; "each flame of it is as a precious stone dissolved in ever-moving light." He

finds the semblance of flame in the unlikeliest places, even in water, for the dew in a flower is like fire ; even in the solid marble, for the pyramid of Cestus is a flame. Everywhere he sees colour, fused with light and in perpetual movement. The whole visible universe is "a dome of many-coloured glass," which "stains the white radiance of Eternity." Shakespeare had hinted that such was his conception of the world, but Shelley worked it out with a convinced sincerity and daring imaginative insight which seem part of the very texture of this fascinating personality whose fit emblem is the flame of the funeral pyre.

Shelley is interesting from the present point of view because his mind was, to a very unusual degree, of the visual type ; he saw the world more than he heard it or felt it, the only other sense that is strikingly present in his work being that of smell. Keats's world (in "Hyperion," "Isabella," "Lamia," and the later short poems) is equally interesting but for a different reason. He is not what psychologists would call a visual. His conception of the world has a basis which is chiefly auditory and tactile, and in a lesser degree gustatory. To every poet, indeed, hearing should be the primary sense. It is the sensuous ear that he needs above all. He creates sound effects that appeal to the mind through the ear. That is a truism : it is well known how fond poets are of mouthing their own verse, and how they love to accentuate the rhythm to an extent which logical non-poetic people regard as extravagant. The poet's chief secondary sense is usually sight, which must always bulk largely even in the work of blind poets. But with Keats sight is relatively less prominent than usual. With him, touch, the most fundamental of all the senses, seems to

possess a moulding force which is rare in poetry, and with him also that modified kind of touch which we know as taste has a somewhat peculiar prominence. Hence the concrete solidity of Keats's work, and its velvety, sapid qualities, characteristic of the man of whom the oft-quoted cayenne and claret story is told. One is struck at first by the luxuriance of Keats's colour. When we come to analyse it we find it is very largely verbal colour. His colour-words are not epithets of colours he has seen; they are words that have appealed to his ear, that he found in books and brooded over, vague, exotic colour-words that no one would think of using in the presence of actual colour. Keats showed a miraculous mastery in the use of such colour-words; in the perception of colour he seems to have been a child. The one colour that he calls constantly by its simple name, and with genuine simple delight, is the colour that happened to be then the most popular with poets—green. He seems to have loved the green of fields and trees with the enthusiasm of a city child to whom the country is "green felicity." For the rest he uses colour-words chiefly as symbols of joy. All his colour is joyous, for which reason he scarcely ever uses black, and no great poet is more licentious in the use of "golden" as a mere piece of poetic slang.

Wordsworth (in the "Prelude" and many of the best-known shorter poems) presents a colour-scheme which is the extreme type of that prevailing in his day. Green and yellow predominate, as he might himself say, "like sunshine o'er green fields." He uses green twice as frequently as any other colour, usually as the almost mechanical attribute of the things he most cares for, and he has a special predilection for gray.

Yellow occurs, chiefly of flowers, with a certain definiteness ; but, on the whole, it cannot be said that Wordsworth, any more than Coleridge, was keenly sensitive to the joy of colour.

Poe's colour-scheme (as revealed in his principal poems) is peculiar but difficult to define. His, indeed, is a case which well illustrates the value of the numerical method in summing up and accentuating the characteristics of a writer's artistic vision. Yellow, violet, purple and black are the colours preferred by this very personal and original poet, and they curiously express his vision of the world. It may be added that, although he rarely elaborates colour-effects, his colour is precise and well realised, never merely conventional.

Baudelaire's colour formula (in the *Fleurs du Mal*, including some of the omitted poems) is also very personal, and somewhat recalls that of Poe. Its most conspicuous feature is the enormous preponderance of black. Baudelaire uses black as the symbol of horror and melancholy, but by no means always with repulsion ; frequently in his hands its emotional tone is of complacency, satisfaction, even beauty. After black, red is the most prevalent colour, chiefly in the form of " rose," and nearly always with a suggestion of happiness ; therefore he well summed up his own tastes when he wrote of :

" Le charme inattendu d'un bijou rose et noir."

Blue (little used by English poets) is also a colour of predilection with Baudelaire, chiefly with associations of happiness and peace.

Tennyson (in the greater part of the Golden Treasury selection of his lyrical poems) was a very great master of colour. It is clear that he possessed

a keen delight in colour, together with marked colour-preferences, and he elaborates his effects with singular boldness, and more deliberate skill than had perhaps ever been applied to the matter before. It is Tennyson's distinction that in his work what may be called the normal æsthetic colour-vision is once more fully restored after the aberrations of two centuries. A lighter and brighter feeling for colour was now in the air. Tennyson had taken the place of Thomson, just as Constable had taken the place of Crome. Tennyson's predilection is for rich, deep, fully saturated colours. No poet uses crimson, and perhaps purple, with such brooding, sensuous delight. It is characteristic that he has a preference for the term amber, evidently feeling that, by its sound at least, it strikes a deeper bass note than yellow. Tennyson loves "the gorgeous gloom of evening over brake and bloom," and the colours of fruits, the crimson and scarlet of berries, the soft deep purple of plums, the rich gold of pears, the ruddiness of apples, "redder than rosiest health or than utterest shame." Most English poets have sung of "golden" hair; Tennyson, in his love of pigment, prefers black hair, or, if not, it is usually "dark hair" or "deepest brown." His skill is shown not only by the alert avoidance of the excesses into which his predilections might carry him, but also by the deliberate art with which he escapes from conventional colour and heightens his colour-effects :

"It seems that I am happy, that to me  
A livelier emerald twinkles in the grass,  
A purer sapphire melts into the sea."

Swinburne's colour (in the greater part of the first series of *Poems and Ballads*) is copious, but not elabo-



rated, nor usually, perhaps, very clearly seen. With Swinburne the ear has not only been first, but all the other senses have lagged far behind. At times he tries to obtain impossible colour-effects by turning into colour channels words that have no normal colour association, like "subtle," and he dreams of lands where "the red rose is white," and where things that are white "shine as colour does." But, on the whole, his colour-scheme is very simple and restricted; he holds to the three staples, red, white, and yellow—usually as red lips, white limbs, and golden hair—and he has described his preferences in describing his own muse, "Madonna Mia":

"white and gold and red,  
God's three chief words, man's bread  
And oil and wine,  
Were given her for dowers."

Rossetti's poems (in the complete edition of 1891) are peculiarly interesting as the work of an artist who was eminent as a painter and possessed a very fine feeling for colour. It cannot be said that Rossetti's colour in literature is a reflection of his colour in painting. He elaborates no gorgeous effects; crimson and purple only occur twice each, scarlet, vermilion, violet not at all. But he shows as fine a sense of the value of colour in poetry as in painting, perhaps a finer sense. He uses the simplest and clearest colour-words, like all the writers who have really seen colour, and he uses them rarely and strongly. He will repeatedly strike a colour harmony in the course of two or three lines with the seemingly casual felicity of intensely realised imaginative vision. It may be noted, as a possible exception to his preference for simple colours, that he only once uses yellow (of hair),

though he so frequently uses golden, especially of hair (twenty-three times); hair indeed is for him nearly always golden, never black or brown. The really characteristic feature in his colour-scheme is, however, the white. He uses it very variously and copiously, preferably not as the conventional symbol of beauty but as the symbol of terror and dread. This may be seen very clearly in "Sister Helen," but it penetrates all his poetic work, and if we were to include his very frequent use of "wan," "pale," "gray," this tendency would be seen to dominate his whole imaginative work in literature. Rossetti has given the fullest imaginative expression to the latent northern feeling for white as the colour of dimly terrible things, the colour of the pale mists that enwrap the vague supernatural powers of lands that know little of the sun.

Walt Whitman was contemptuous of what he considered the feudal literature of Europe, but it can scarcely be said that his colour-vision, at all events (in "Children of Adam," "Calamus," "Drum-Taps," &c.), differs markedly from that of Tennyson and his other European contemporaries. He likes strong simple colour, and the chief characteristics of his scheme are a dislike to the conventional "golden," leading to an unusual use of yellow, and also a predilection for black and for brown, the colour of tanned autumnal things, which in England we must regard as more characteristic of the past than the present. Green is not a predominant colour of "Leaves of Grass."

The interesting feature in Pater's colour-scheme (as shown in several chapters of *Marius*) is its return to the classic type, with prevalence of white and yellow. The whole scheme resembles that of Catullus, save

that in the latter there is greater prominence of red. That a writer should thus instinctively adopt the colour preferences of the age towards which he was attracted is another proof of the assurance with which we may usually rely on this test. In the emotional tone of the white which he uses so freely, as well as in its prevalence, Pater exhibits the classic feeling, the feeling indeed of all southern peoples, for the one touch of colour which the austere epicureanism of the Semitic preacher would allow was a white garment. Pater's insistence on white seems to come, as he would himself say, "from the lips of one who had about him some secret fascination in his own expression of a perfect temperance, as if the merely negative quality of purity, the absence of any taint or flaw, exercised a positive influence."

Verlaine in his *Romances sans Paroles, Sagesse, &c.*, is in his use of colour a true child of the Ardennes, a lover of mist, of twilight, of moonlight, and although not insensitive to colour, his single predilection is for gray :

" Rien de plus cher que la charme grise  
Ou l'Indécis au Précis se joint."

It may be noted that Verlaine's colour-formula, while remaining personal in its predilection for gray, combines the characteristics of the writers to whom he was chiefly attracted; on the one hand it recalls Baudelaire's; on the other it is related to that of the English writers, especially Tennyson in his lyrics, with whom he felt a close affinity. He dwells on the borderland between day and night, when

" Au ciel pieux la lune glisse  
Et que sonnent les angélus roses et noirs."

He uses the same curious *nuance* of harmonies in colour again and again in very unlikely positions.

In Olive Schreiner's *Dreams* white is again predominant, used with the southern emotional tone. The most remarkable feature here is the deficiency of green and the prominence of blue. There is no attempt to obtain atmosphere or harmony, but the colour is always very emphatic and clearly visualised.

The series concludes with Gabriele D'Annunzio's volume of poems, *Intermezzo*. D'Annunzio is the most conspicuous among the younger Italian writers, and his colour-formula stands out as that in which—if we put aside the very primitive writers—red is most prominent, thus furnishing the climax of a movement which has been going on steadily for two centuries.

One asks oneself on looking at these tables : What do they mean ? I have no wish to forestall the reader's own interpretation of them, but I may indicate one or two of the meanings which to me they seem to possess. Although a larger series would be needed to give full assurance, I do not think the general result would be affected.

There are three things, it seems to me, which colour in literature describes or symbolises : nature, man, imagination. These three cover the whole ground. The predominance of green or blue—the colours of vegetation, the sky, and the sea—means that the poet is predominantly a poet of nature. If red and its synonyms are supreme, we may assume an absorbing interest in man and woman, for there are the colours of blood and love, the two main pivots of human affairs, at all events in poetry. And where there is a pre-

dominance of black, white, and, I think I would add, yellow—the colours that are rare in the world, and the colour of golden impossibilities—there we shall find that the poet is singing with, as it were, closed eyes, intent on his own inner vision. Wordsworth and Shelley belong largely to the first class ; Chaucer and Whitman largely to the second ; Homer, Marlowe, Blake, Poe, and Rossetti largely to the third. We cannot, of course, expect any great degree of precision in the matter. Green among the earlier writers is commonly used of garments ; blue often refers to eyes and veins ; it is chiefly by their tone that black, white, and yellow reveal the imaginative instincts ; and red refers to human things in only about fifty per cent. cases in which it occurs. But the general tendency remains distinct.

Leaving the question of interpretation, we may consider the historical evolution of the colours taken separately. The æsthetic position of white has been fairly constant throughout. Black has varied irregularly, predominating in the writers of any age whose imagination is grave, sombre, and melancholy. Yellow has also predominated irregularly, in accordance with no single tendency, being associated sometimes with a sunny, sometimes with a jaundiced view of life, though it is most conspicuous in the poets of classic instinct. Red furnishes, on the whole, a very even curve ; high among primitive writers, it sinks in the seventeenth century to rise again during the present century. According to Professor Earl Barnes, who has tested many hundred American boys and girls, a preference for red indicates a certain degree of maturity, younger children usually preferring blue. A love for red is evidently associated with the passionate

and sensuous enjoyment of natural and human things, as in the "Wooring of Emer," in Chaucer, Shakespeare, Keats, Tennyson, and D'Annunzio. Blue, and especially green, furnish the most curious and instructive æsthetic history. It is obvious at a glance how the mistake arose that early man was insensitive to these colours; one or the other, or both, furnish not less than six *lacunæ* in the first five of the series. The savage rarely possesses words for either colour, and even the Greeks in the fourth century of our era had no specialised word for green. The things that we call blue they were content to call dark or black, so that for them the sky was of the same colour as dark hair; while the things that we call green they were content to consider yellow, the colour of honey.

The æsthetic vision of the Greeks included black, white, red, and yellow. In so remote a country as Brazil, von der Steinen found that only these same colours possessed distinct words among every tribe, though all tribes were able to distinguish blue and green. Even where blue and green epithets exist we find very strange anomalies. The natives of India deny that the sky is blue, in the sense that indigo is blue; they call it "sky-coloured." And the Chinese, while they distinguish blue from green perfectly, and have words for both, call the sky green. We have no right to smile, for it is only of recent years that the poets of this sea-girt island have discerned the colour of the sea. For Shakespeare the sea was green, as it was for Coleridge, and for most poets before Shelley.

The primary source of all these anomalies lies in the fact that primitive man had no uses for green and blue. The greenness of vegetation is of little concern in savage life, and it is only in vegetation that green

ever becomes conspicuous. The colour of the sky and the sea, except when it becomes dark, is equally a matter of indifference to savages. Moreover, both blue and green seem to have been generally difficult to obtain as pigments; they are certainly seldom so used by primitive peoples. Probably they were not sought after. The result was that, as green and blue were of little concern either in nature or in the arts of life, they failed to evolve any æsthetic feeling. When green begins to appear, at all events in English literature, as represented in my tables, it is usually associated less with nature than with man, as the colour of garments. It is so in the *Morte d'Arthur*, and often in Chaucer, while even Marlowe's references to green are not to vegetation. It is in the seventeenth century that we first find trace of a conscious and deliberate joy in green with special reference to its symbolism of nature. This tendency was a by-product of the Puritan movement. The men who turned from courts and towns began to find pleasure in the country, and the predominant colour of the country became for them the symbol of that pleasure. There is something of this in Milton. In Marvell, who clearly possessed a keen delight in colour, it is well marked, and in a single couplet he has felicitously expressed this attitude of the æsthetic Puritan :

“ Annihilating all that's made,  
To a green thought in a green shade.”

If we take Palgrave's *Golden Treasury* of lyrics and analyse its four parts, which roughly correspond to the last four centuries, we find that while in Part I. red comes first, in Part II. red and green are about equal. During the eighteenth century poets lived much in

the country, and the deliberate use of green greatly increased. That Thomson represents and even exaggerates the type of colour-vision prevailing in his century is shown by Part III. of the *Golden Treasury*, where we find that green is the most prominent colour, though closely followed by red, while black is as prevalent as white, a phenomenon found in no other century. Towards the end of the eighteenth century this æsthetic current towards green was reinforced by German influence which then began to affect English literature. In German literature there had long been a simple, instinctive pleasure in green things, the heritage of a people which issued from the forests. Even in *Faust* I find that green predominates throughout, followed at a considerable distance by red. Among the Slavs also, especially in their folk-songs, according to Veckenstedt, green abounds. This tendency was therefore at this time partly native, partly exotic. Wordsworth represents the climax of the green movement in English literature; in his hands the epithet becomes merely a label which the poet affixes almost mechanically to his literary baggage. If a love of green, as a writer with some claim to be an authority has somewhat absurdly declared, "heralds a laxity, if not a decadence of morals," the end of the last century was certainly such an age, and Wordsworth was its chief prophet. It was clearly impossible to go farther in that direction. Tennyson performed the feat of incarnadining this multitudinous sea of green. He was the leader of a new movement. Not that Tennyson had any repugnance to green; on the contrary, he shows a distinct appreciation of it, and even follows some of the early writers in introducing green garments. But he evidently realised that



for his immediate predecessors greenness had become a bald convention, and he exercises a certain research in obtaining his green effects. The type of colour-formula which Tennyson introduced, or re-introduced, is substantially that which still rules to-day.

The colour-type of the future can scarcely be forecast. It is evident, however, that the æsthetic value of blue has not yet been fully developed in English literature; and there are signs that the English-speaking children of sunnier skies will find new scope in weaving into their work the colour of the sky and the sea, and the ideas of infinity and depth which it most naturally symbolises.

Although I cannot claim to have put this numerical test of colour-vision into a final shape, there can be little doubt that it possesses at least two uses in the precise study of literature. It is, first, an instrument for investigating a writer's personal psychology, by defining the nature of his æsthetic colour-vision. When we have ascertained a writer's colour-formula and his colours of predilection, we can tell at a glance simply and reliably, something about his view of the world which pages of description could only tell us with uncertainty. In the second place, it enables us to take a definite step in the attainment of a scientific æsthetic, by furnishing a means of comparative study. By its help we can trace the colours of the world as mirrored in literature from age to age, from country to country, and in finer shades among the writers of a single group. At least one broad and unexpected conclusion may be gathered from the tables here presented. Many foolish things have been written about the "degeneration" of latter-day art. It is easy to dogmatise when you think that you are safe from

the evidence of precise tests. But here is a reasonably precise test. And the evidence of this test, at all events, by no means furnishes support for the theory of decadence. On the contrary, it shows that the decadence, if anywhere, was at the end of the last century, and that our own vision of the world is fairly one with that of classic times, with Chaucer's and with Shakespeare's. At the end of the nineteenth century we can say this for the first time since Shakespeare died.











